Nodwell, Mrs. Maude

HOW INNISFREE GOT IT'S NAME

During the summer of 1905 the little town of Del Norte situated on the south east corner of the south east quarter of section 10-51-11 Alberta was a very busy place. Its muddy street was swarming with graders, freighters, nomesteaders, and transient settlers stopping over for a day to fix a broken wagon wheel or some other similar disaster common at that time. These families filed on their homesteads in Edmonton then drove out to find them with nothing more for guidance than, in most instances, a dim wagon track. Sometimes their trail was as much as one or two hundred miles long--to North Battleford, to Lloydminster, to Vermillion, and along the high banks of the Saskatchewan (the river of gold) people with faith in life, peace in their hearts, to their own land--pioneers.

The town consisted of a post office, two general stores, a restaurant, a few other small buildings, and Puckette's stopping house. Jack Norris was the first postmaster and he had the post office in the back of his store. Elmer Jones, my brother-in-law, owned the other store which faced "Norrises" across the street. Anything could be bought in these small log stores with flat sod roofs--from a pound of Blue Ribbon tea at .60 per lb. to a sulkey plow, or a length of all wool yard-wide cloth to make the mens' winter shirts.

The buildings were all of log with sod roofs, most of them low, and the summer rains dripped through despairingly.

Our stopping house differed from the rest as the logs stood on end in stockade fashion, and the roof was so steep the rains washed off with no time to seep in, saving many a day of misery trying to keep the bedding dry.

J.D. Hughes and his fine family owned and operated the restaurant and sometimes they "put people up" for the night. While we had a double bunk in the corner of our living room for the accommodation of "stoppers". Many times have I seen lonely travellers pace the room like caged lions and wondered if they had been banished or what? And why did they leave homewhen it hurt them so much? My sister and I seldom talked to stoppers but my mother and father often spent the evening exchanging experiences with them while we sat back and listened--my father was southern and a University man. He had his ideas on what it took to make a lady.

These "stoppers" came from just about all over the world. From all of the British Isles, most of them educated, down on their luck, city bred too and knew nothing of pioneering. From Australia, California and other states--all of them glad to sit by our red-hot stove winter nights and if the bunks were full of women and children, to roll out their blankets on the floor.

Two years we lived like this--our mail coming from Lavoy 19 miles away, over snow and ice in winter, around a slough that had no bottom during the summer. (So, the distance was shorter in winter.) One week my father or

one of my brothers--C. Puckette or T.E. Puckette--would bring the mail for the entire neighborhood, the next, one of the Norrises--J.J. or Ed, or the other brother, D. Norris, who later lost his life by freezing when trying out an iceboat on Birch Lake, or one of the scattered homesteaders, or Mr. Hughes--there was a rancher, too, named Miller who owned the peninsula and a large herd of cattle--this was 5 miles south of town. Mr. Miller sometimes went for the mail and I would ride with one of my sisters to his ranch after the bundle for town the next day (if the weather permitted).

During the summer of 1905 a contractor named McArthur began grading for the great Canadian Northern Railway which was surveyed and marked with stakes when my father first "squatted" on section 10 early in 1903. The steel was following and only a few miles to our east. His camps were strewn along the survey, visable as far east as the gravel pit, and west towards Ranfurley as far as the big curve, where one engineer almost lost his life when one of the first trains slid off the sandy grade.

We had celebrities for dinner the day it was first suggested that Del Norte should change her name. This was not a new situation however, two engineers who surveyed for the railroad and ate with us three times a day were that type of folk; a certain Charles Tupper, son of a titled family and one Tom Lieth who left letters to his mother with us to be sent out by some passing freighter who would beat the mail carrier to Edmonton. These letters

were addressed to Lady Mary Lieth to an address in Scotland.

A "democrat" pulled up and stopped at the door, and my father went out to greet the passengers. It was a man named Walker who was at that time a high official in the Canadian Bank of Commerce. He was traveling through from Winnipeg to Edmonton ahead of the railroad picking out the towns where they would build. He had with him a number of top-notch newspaper men, one with his young knicker-bockered son, was from London.

It was a bit early for the noon meal. The men with my father as guide walked the quarter mile path which was cut by the surveyors two summers before to the top of "Anita" hill. From there one could see for a great many miles in each direction. Off to the south, one mile away and hid from town by the big hill, lay Birch Lake sparkling in the clear bright Alberta sun. The far shore-line was ten miles beyond, on a hazy blue vaporous mist. There were islands green as emeralds nestled here and there, one the "big" island with a fifty foot cliff for its western shore-line while the eastern side seemed to sink into the water, and tall dead peeled trunks of trees stood in jagged groups far out into the water where they at last disappeared entirely. This island was one mile from shore, a nice distance to row in summer, and quite some walk over the three foot thick ice in winter. Mr. Walker was charmed by our native scenery. He told my father that it reminded him of his boyhood home, a town called "Innisfree" in Scotland.

To the east and at the foot of "Eddy" hill was Anita Lake. This pretty little lake was named by my father two summers before when he followed the surveyors around from sheer loneliness as they drove the steel stakes that marked the sections and quarter sections--the townships--they asked him to give it a name and he named it for my niece Anita Means who, with her brother Horace had lived with us since her mother's death. The hill south of town we called "Anita" just among ourselves and the other hill south of Anita Lake we named "Eddy" for my nephew Eddy Jones. This same Eddy Jones is now fighting in his second world war.

On past Del Norte,north and west,was the railroad grade only partly finished, and the white tents of the camps were pretty nestled there in the groves of white poplar, birch and balm o'gilead trees. The land rolled back in low, graceful hills and a narrow ravine disclosed a line of tiny sparkling lakes close beside the grade. We had our own names for some of these. One was Duck Lake because of the thousands of wild ducks that nested around it and swam there unmolested through the long summer days. Another we called Echo Lake because our voices echoed across it and back our first winter when we lived in a dugout on its steep eastern bank.

After a while the men went back down the path cut through the trees and wild fruit bushes. I can see the path yet, in memory; and another one cut up the mountain

side--the International Line at King's Gate. They were the same kind of pathway and closely associated in my memory.

Mr. Walker talked earnestly about the resemblance of this place to his boyhood home, Innisfree. He wanted the name changed. He told my father that if he would see to it he would build the largest bank for them of any along the line. He would also send as a personal present to my father two large bunting flags, A Union Jack and Stars and Stripes.

My father told him of the Nodwell colony headed by George H. Nodwell of Grand Valley Ontario. This colony would settle two townships and the settlers would arrive with the first trains coming through.

Some of the more adventurous of these had come on and were already cutting scrub from their future wheat fields and living in the crude log houses, drinking slough water from holes dug at the edges of small grass-grown lakes, carrying a week's supply of provisions in sacks slung over their backs as they trudged through the dark, wading the knee-high prairie grass home after Saturday in "town".

I never will forget how we rushed around getting the meal on the table when we saw the men coming down the hill. We knew as did all the town who our guests were and we wanted everything right. The table linen was clean as was the crowded kitchen where they must eat. We had a

very unique way of checking the food--one of us would go over the "rig-a-ma-role" as we called it, "Bread and butter, sugar and cream cookies and fruit, beans, meat and potatoes, coffee and tea." There would be jelly, too, and pickles, and perhaps pie as we made them often; our table was usually crowded.

All I can remember about that meal was that the son of the London newspaper man turned the bean dish over and was terribly embarrassed; but it was only funny to us--we had learned the great philosophy to not become ruffled over little things and to always see the funny side.

Changing the name of Del Norte to Innisfree caused a lot of argument but at last it was done. We had mail sent to Innisfail, a town on the C.P.R., until our friends learned to address our letters to Innisfree, C.N.R. The imposing bank was built and we were very proud of it. The flags arrived, too, after some delay and my father had me write Mr. Walker that he was sure the Stars and Stripes had devoured the Union Jack and flown south!

Writing this brings back many little incidents never to be forgotten. One of these is seeing the car belonging to the J.J. Gulley family which came west with the other colonists settlers effects, burning on the track. After making the trip safely it caught fire as it reached its destination. But that was only one of the trials, hardships, and heartbreaks lived down by these sturdy people who settled the west and eventually sold wheat that graded

as good or better than any grown any place in the world; for, while this land was new, homes and stock were destroyed when prairie fires swept through, folks were lost in storms,and frozen fields of grain were beaten in the ground by hail, our people at Innisfree stuck to the job. Innisfree, I still love it, because in the beginning it was our's. It belonged to us Puckettes.